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Should CIA go public?

To judge from his comments to the press this week about the Central Intelligence Agency, President Ford has decided on a new policy of candor and plain speaking. He frankly said the CIA will go right on being as deceptive and underhanded as ever. That's letting it all hang out.

Mr. Ford had to say something, of course, and his choices were rather limited. He couldn't very well denounce the CIA, particularly now when congressmen are queuing up on all sides to investigate its role in bringing down the Allende government in Chile. On the other hand, he couldn't come out four-square for unlimited undercover meddling by one nation in the internal politics of another.

So he took a middle course, explaining that everybody engages in this sort of meddling and suggesting that it is very bad except when we do it. The explanation is not, let us say, perfect.

After seeing one President destroyed by Watergate, it is not comforting to hear from the new President that there's something to be said for lawbreaking—after all, it does help us get what we want. That, we hope, is a minority view right now. Beyond that, Mr. Ford seems convinced that the cold war is still on and still justifies any tactics we may care to use against governments we don't trust. Former President Nixon's optimism about an "era of cooperation instead of confrontation" evidently left

the scene with him.

Obviously this country must have an efficient worldwide intelligence system. The rub comes when the system starts making other governments' decisions for them, and enforcing the decisions by criminal means. Whatever this approach may do for other countries [not much, we suspect], for us it succeeds mainly in setting off riots outside United States embassies and discrediting American intentions and policies everywhere.

The time may have come to change our approach to the whole business. We might, for instance, deemphasize the cloak-and-dagger scene—which is getting a bit old-fashioned and counterproductive anyway—and try something really new: A public-spirited CIA. A force of frank, manly, plainspoken intelligence agents may be just what the world is waiting for.

CIA agents could be clearly identified by lapel badges. These should carry the agent's full name and say something engaging, like "Hi, there!" Operatives should be friendly but frank with the people they're spying on; interviewees should be asked to speak up and talk directly into the agent's martini olive. Any secret drawers around should be plainly labeled "Secret Drawer."

It would be a wholly new, thoroly American approach to spying, and it would completely paralyze enemy agents. They'd spend all their time trying to figure out what we were really up to.

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